

Amendments to the Claims:

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions and listings of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

1. (Currently Amended) A system for enabling an issuing authority to distribute benefits to a plurality of patrons, the system comprising:
 - a) at least one smart card associated with each patron of the plurality of patrons, the at least one smart card having a serial number and means for storing information, the smart card configured to operate in at least one of a plurality of benefit types;
 - b) a central computer controlled by the issuing authority and having applications for processing benefits information, the benefits information including a benefits monetary value associated with each said patron;
 - c) a benefits storage device connected to the central computer for storing the benefits information [I.] ;
 - d) an entry means ~~for inputting or updating the benefits information~~ **allowing a benefits provider to input or update the benefits monetary value** to the benefits storage device, **wherein the benefits provider is a different entity than the issuing authority;**and
 - e) an express vending machine having a bidirectional electronic connection to the central computer for accepting a transfer of at least a portion of the benefits monetary value **stored at the benefits storage device** to the at least one smart card, the express vending machine having a user interface for each said patron to request the benefits and a benefit type from the plurality of benefit types, and a read/write mechanism for reading the at least one smart card and writing the benefits monetary value and the benefit type to the at least one smart card.

2. (Original) The system for distributing benefits as in claim 1, wherein the entry means for inputting benefits information is a terminal connected to the central computer by means of an intranet connection.

3. (Original) The system for distributing benefits as in claim 2, further comprising a smart card read/write device connected to the terminal for writing the at least a portion of the benefits monetary value to the at least one smart card.

4. (Currently Amended) The system for distributing benefits as in claim 1, further comprising:

a web server connected to the central computer; and

a remote terminal connected to the web server by means of an internet connection, the remote terminal **for inputting allowing the benefits provider to input or update the** benefits information **including the benefits monetary value via the entry means.**

5. (Original) The system for distributing benefits as in claim 4, further comprising a smart card read/write device connected to the terminal for writing the at least a portion of the benefits monetary value to the at least one smart card.

6. (Original) The system for distributing benefits as in claim 1, wherein the issuing authority is a transit system authority.

7. (Original) The system for distributing benefits as in claim 6, wherein the at least one smart card is used for purchasing transit fares and parking fees from the transit authority.

8. (Currently Amended) The system for distributing benefits as in claim 1, wherein the **issuing authority benefits provider** is a welfare agency.

9. (Original) The system for distributing benefits as in claim 8, wherein the benefits are for food expenses, and wherein the at least one smart card is used for purchasing food.

10. (Original) The system for distributing benefits as in claim 1, wherein the express vending machine further comprises a station monitor and display system for connecting the express vending machine to the central computer, the station monitor and display system for collecting transaction and maintenance data from the express vending machine.

11. (Original) The system for distributing benefits as in claim 10, wherein the station monitor and display system forward the transaction and maintenance data to the central computer for consolidation and preparation of a plurality of management reports.

12. (Original) The system for distributing benefits as in claim 1, wherein the express vending machine has an add value function for each said patron to add value to the at least one smart card separate and in addition to the benefits monetary value.

13. (Currently Amended) The system for distributing benefits as in claim 1, wherein ~~a customer~~ the benefits provider comprises one of a plurality of ~~customers~~ benefits providers, wherein the benefits provider is responsible for offering the benefits to a set of patrons of the plurality of patrons, and wherein the ~~customer~~ the benefits provider is liable to the issuing authority for the benefits monetary value distributed to the set of patrons.

14. (Currently Amended) The system for distributing benefits as in claim 13, wherein the ~~customer~~ the benefits provider is a private employer.

15. (Currently Amended) The system for distributing benefits as in claim 13, wherein the ~~customer~~ the benefits provider is a public employer.

16. (Currently Amended) A method for distributing benefits to a patron of a plurality of patrons, the method comprising the steps of:

maintaining a benefits data base in a central computer, the benefits data base including benefits information for the plurality of patrons, the benefits information including a patron identifier and a monetary benefit value for the patron;

modifying the monetary benefit value for the patron in response to input received at the central computer transmitted from a benefits provider distinct, wherein the benefits provider is different entity from an issuing authority for a smart card;

downloading at least a portion of the **modified** monetary benefit value to **[[a]] the** smart card upon a request from the patron at a vending machine; and configuring the smart card for a particular benefit type from a plurality of benefit types.

17. (Currently Amended) The method of distributing benefits as in claim 16, wherein step of maintaining a benefits data base includes **entering allowing the benefits provider to enter** benefits data into the benefits data base utilizing a remote terminal.

18. (Original) The method of distributing benefits as in claim 17, wherein the remote terminal is connected to the main computer by means of an Internet connection.

19. (Original) The method of distributing benefits as in claim 16, wherein the step of downloading further includes the steps of:

requesting a claim at the vending machine;
sending a request message to the central computer;
sending a response message from the central computer to the vending machine, the response message containing an authorized value;
writing the authorized value to the smart card;
sending a confirmation message to the central computer that the authorized value was written to the smart card.

20. (Original) The method of distributing benefits as in claim 19, wherein the request message includes a serial number from the smart card, a sequence number, and a

requested value, and wherein the confirmation message is not received by the central computer, further comprising the step of:

verifying the sequence number against a stored sequence number to determine whether the card has received the requested value in a prior transaction.